

# GUINEA PIG BONDING GUIDE

Guinea pigs are naturally sociable animals and must live in pairs or groups. A lone guinea pig is often a stressed guinea pig as they cannot express natural social behaviours. The bonding process typically takes around a week, however, all guinea pigs have different personalities, so sometimes it can take longer. Sometimes it is love at first sight and there is an instant bond, but some individuals take a little longer to get to know each other.

## Before you start:

Guinea pigs can be in same-sex pairs, or groups. There should only be one male in a group of females, otherwise the males may fight. All male guinea pigs must be **neutered** to avoid breeding.

All guinea pigs should be **health-checked to ensure they are healthy** before bonding.



## Our guide

1. Set up a neutral area with lots of hay and a water bowl. There shouldn't be any toys or houses in at this stage as they can fight over them. Scattered pellets and vegetables can be added.
2. Place all of the guinea pigs in the enclosure at the same time. Step back and observe. There will probably be a variety of behaviours exhibited at the beginning. These will include **sniffing each other, chasing, chattering, mounting, yawning and rumble strutting**. These are all normal guinea pig behaviours which show they are trying to establish a hierarchy; one guinea pig will normally be dominant over the others.
3. **If blood is drawn, split the guinea pigs immediately. It is unlikely they will be able to bond unfortunately.** If all is well after a couple of hours, you can start to leave them alone for short periods of time. Keep going back to check on them every half hour or so. If they are sitting together or lying down near one another you can safely leave them. They are now happy and relaxed around each other.
4. After a day or two, if they are displaying **positive behaviours**, such as **sleeping near each other**, appearing **relaxed** and **grooming** one another, a food bowl can be introduced. The guinea pigs should be supervised for this to observe that they will share food nicely and there is no territorial behaviour.
5. Following on from introducing a food bowl, enrichment such as an open-ended hides can then be introduced. This is to see if they can continue to share resources without becoming territorial. If you see any territorial behaviours, such as one guinea pig using a hide and defending it, you can remove these and go back a few steps.



6. Observe the guinea pigs whenever you can. Keep them in this set up for a few days to ensure that they are comfortable living together.
7. Once these steps have been completed and they have been living together for a few days, they can be moved into their permanent enclosure with normal hides and enrichment. You must ensure everything has been thoroughly cleaned to remove any scent to reduce the risks of territorial behaviours occurring. You will need to add in extra houses and tunnels so there are enough to go around. Try and use some new enrichment items or move things around so it seems “new”. It’s a good idea to keep an eye on them for the first 30 minutes as this is a new area and could potentially cause the bonding process to go back a couple of steps. In extreme cases, you may need to remove some enrichment items if bickering occurs.

#### Common behaviours to look out for when bonding your guinea pigs:

- Ignoring each other – this is a good sign as it means they are comfortable enough around each other to carry on as normal.
- Rumble strutting – this is a common guinea pig behaviour and is used to assert dominance and establish a hierarchy. Rumble-strutting is when a guinea pig makes a rumbling noise and moves its body from side to side, which is a dominance behaviour.
- Teeth chattering – another common behaviour during bonding that can be worrying for some owners. Guinea pigs chattering their teeth can be a warning and a signal to the other guinea pig that they would like some space, or to show nervousness. It is normal and enables them to establish boundaries, although it can indicate some tension. If displaying this behaviour guinea pigs should be closely observed to ensure it does not escalate.
- Head raising – guinea pigs will often raise their heads higher than another pig as a sign of dominance. It is common for two guinea pigs to face each other, raising their heads higher and higher to establish whose boss.
- Chasing – again, this is common so shouldn’t be stopped. During bonding you typically want to see one guinea pig head raising and chasing (establishing dominance) and the other running away. If one guinea pig is constantly chasing the other one, you can stop them by placing your hand between them. Food can also be used a distraction to help ease tension and give the guinea pig a chance to have a break.
- Nipping – minor nipping or turning their head to the other can also happen and is one guinea pig telling the other to move away or show dominance, usually it is more pushing them with their nose. As long as it does not break the skin, and the other guinea pig moves away from the boss then it is fine.
- Mounting – this is a normal behaviour where one guinea pig climbs on top of the other and can resemble mating. This is normally to display dominance and can also be due to excitement. This may be a repetitive behaviour. Try not to stop this behaviour; if the submissive guinea pig dislikes being mounted, they will let the other guinea pig know and should sort it amongst themselves.
- Lunging – this is where one guinea pig will quickly jump towards another with their mouth open like they’re ready to bite. Lunging itself is not always a huge problem if the guinea pig doing it is not trying to actually bite, and the other pig runs away. It is important to close monitor to ensure the behaviour calms down.



- Grooming – this is rare in the first few hours or days, but it is the best sign for bonding. You may see one of the guinea pigs putting their head under another, or some gentle nibbling or licking around the ears or eyes. These are all positive signs.
- Popcorning – guinea pigs can ‘popcorn’ when they are excited and happy! You may not see this until the later stages of the bonding process. It is where a guinea pig will run around quickly and often bounces, flicking their head and legs.
- Fighting – occasionally fighting can occur where the guinea pigs’ ball up. This behaviour requires immediate intervention (using a towel or gloves) and checking over for injuries. Separation is recommended, however once the individuals calm down, introductions can be tried again. If this behaviour is recurring, it’s unlikely that the bond will work.

All these behaviours can be a normal part of the bonding process. Guinea pigs should **only** be separated if it looks like blood could be or has been drawn. For example, if they start fighting and one has bitten or scratched the other then please separate immediately. Unfortunately, there is very little chance that they will form a bond after this, and we would advise not putting them back together. For any wounds, please seek veterinary treatment.

#### **Successfully bonded!**

Now you hopefully have a bonded pair or group of guinea pigs! Wherever possible, guinea pigs should always be always kept with their bonded partner, to ensure they are happy. When guinea pigs require vet treatment or transportation, it is best to take the bonded guinea pigs together in the same carrier to keep their bond strong and to reduce stress.

#### **Unsuccessful bonding**

Sometimes, bonding isn’t successful. Like with people, not everyone gets on! If you have had an unsuccessful bond, please ensure you don’t leave any guinea pig alone permanently and consider your options of rehoming or introducing more guinea pigs into your household. It is advised to let them de-stress for at least a week before attempting bonding with a different guinea pig.

**Raystede provides a bonding service (this is at a non-refundable fee of £20.00) for those looking to adopt a companion guinea pig from our centre.**

**We are happy to give bonding tips and recommend enclosure sizes/types for the bonding process.**

Email: [smallanimals@raystede.org](mailto:smallanimals@raystede.org)

Telephone: **01825 880467** (Please leave a message if we are with the animals).